

Knowing your target readers

The first rule of any good communicator is to know your audience. Having a clear idea of the age, sex, education, job role, size of company, industry, location, experience, interest, stresses, and viewing devices of your ideal target readers gives you a better shot at reaching them with language and imagery that resonates with them.

For example, many men in business — especially old-school men — appreciate the language of combat and sports: bashing, crushing, defeating, stomping, winning, and so on. But to many women, these metaphors are a complete turnoff. Worse yet, people from other cultures may not even know what you mean by football or NASCAR. If you know in advance, for example, that 50 percent of your audience for a background paper are women in Europe, would you still use that same

language? Or would you appreciate the chance to find another frame of reference?

Another even simpler example is readability. People's eyes begin to change around age 40. As most people get older, they find it harder to resolve small print. So your designer should be aware of the intended age of your audience. If your readers are all 20-something, you can probably get away with gray text at a smaller point size. But if they're all 50-something executives, your designer should pump up the point size and make all the text crisp black on white.

Knowing your audience isn't about being sexist and ageist; it's about having a better clue of how to tailor your message to make it easy to decipher and understand.

A background, like all white papers, includes three parts: front matter, main body, and back matter. The following lists discuss briefly what to include in each part of a background and how many pages each should run. For more tips and discussion, see Chapter 10. You can also check out sample backgrounds at www.thatwhitepaperguy.com/sample-white-papers.html.

Front matter: One to three pages

The front matter of a background shows what your paper is about and how it's structured and includes the following elements:

- ✓ **A cover page** is optional in a background, and you can often combine the cover with the contents and copyright page. A text-only cover page shows the title, subtitle (if any), vendor, and sometimes the date the paper was published. You can include all this info in a few lines of text or expand it typographically to fill an entire page. Some backgrounds have visual covers, with a photo of the offering in action, the intended reader, or something else that suggests the contents.
- ✓ **The contents and copyright** sections often appear on the same page, sometimes with the cover page. The contents section provides a quick overview of your document that many readers use to skip to the pages they want. It usually takes up about half a page, certainly no more than one page. In the contents, you typically list the main headings and perhaps the secondary headings, if any. In a longer document, you may

want to list all the tables and figures; in a shorter one, you can leave them out. You can then tuck your copyright notice at the bottom. Legal teams from most vendors want to insert a disclaimer along with the copyright notice. Work with them to keep it short and sweet.

- ✓ **An executive summary** is optional in this flavor and serves to "tell them what you're going to tell them." In a longer background, you may want to sum up the whole paper in just a few paragraphs at the start to help readers scan or cut-and-paste from your overview. In a shorter background, no executive summary may be needed, especially if the list of contents shows clearly what's covered in the paper.

Main body: Five or more pages

Here's where you get to the tastiest bits of the background, including the following:

- ✓ **The introduction** sketches in the intended audience, the scope of the white paper, and the level of technical detail throughout and points to any other related documents from the same vendor or elsewhere. The introduction should take up about one page. If you include an executive summary in the front matter, you may not need an introduction, but some backgrounds have both.
- ✓ **The features and benefits** of the offering itself should span at least four pages of meaty content; otherwise, your background will be too short to look like much of a white paper. Describe each feature in as much detail as required, and translate each feature into a benefit that your target audience can appreciate. Benefits make any background much more persuasive than a mere list of technical features because they link the abstract to the concrete, the technical to the real world. In the features and benefits section, you deliver the key messages of the white paper, or in other words, you "tell them."

The best strategy is to stick to the facts and prove your assertions with benchmarks or test results, industry awards, reviews, or comments from acknowledged experts. If you have any such sources to reference, include them either as *footnotes* at the bottom of the page or *endnotes* gathered together on a separate page at the back of the white paper.

Back matter: Two pages

The back matter wraps up all the helpful info in the earlier sections with the following elements:

- ✓ A brief set of **conclusions**, no more than half a page, rounds out a background nicely and "tells them what you told them." The conclusions should cover the take-away messages that you want all readers to remember.

